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ABSTRACT

It is argued in this paper that a truly holistic approach to school empowerment would legitimize the student as a stakeholder in the educational process. The initial field testing of two developmentally based student feedback mechanisms is described. Focus groups were used with sixth-grade students to assess the "goodness of fit" between students and their school experiences. Developmentally appropriate focus group questions were designed based on sixth-graders' ability to use active imagination. The responses of these urban students were remarkably similar to those given in interviews conducted with adult workers in large organizations about the quality of work life. Another student assessment feedback mechanism used was the Student Empowerment Report Card, based on motivational climate indicators. It was designed for use with high school students and collaborating adults. In interviews, individual students and adults were asked to grade their schools on specific indicators. This report card format has proven to be a consumer-sensitive school planning tool, linking specific assessment needs with prescriptive action plans. A chart showing the School System Empowerment Report Card is included. (SLD)

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Assessing the Holding Power and Attractiveness of a School System for At-Risk Students

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ABSTRACT

This presentation addresses what it considers the weakest link in the school improvement collaborative process, "The Student".

It is argued that a truly holistic approach to school empowerment needs to legitimize students as stakeholders in the educational process. Students have a unique - developing - point of view about the quality of their educational experiences that should be regularly assessed and responded to from elementary grade levels on. Such student feedback and assessment instruments if administered and responded to with regularity and timeliness have the potential to increase the holding power and attractiveness of a school system for at-risk students. Ad hoc and impersonal student opinion surveys administered to older students are viewed as too little and too late.

School systems should follow the lead of successful service oriented businesses who are developing data-bases and response mechanisms that emphasize "Close to the Customer". This present study reports on the initial field testing of developmentally based student feedback mechanisms for different grade levels. It is seen as a logical extension of the School Development Program (SDP) of the Yale Child Study Center emphasis on sensitivity and responsiveness to student needs.

Richard E. Kleiner

Assessing the Holding Power and Attractiveness of a School System for At-Risk Students

A truly holistic approach to school empowerment would view public school students as a legitimate consumer - constituency. It would have established "formal mechanisms" to routinely solicit students' feedback, preferences and motivational patterns for all grade levels.

Unfortunately, it is the rare public school system that treats students as stakeholders and has established such institutional mechanisms. What is more typical is to administer impersonal student opinion surveys on an ad hoc basis for special projects or to have student representatives on a standing committee. Nor is it common practice in public schools for <u>all</u> students to evaluate their classes and the quality of instruction offered. The typical rejoinder offered is that (1) students lack sufficient maturity and judgment to render such opinions and (2) parents' opinions and feedback are routinely solicited.

I believe there is value in legitimitizing and highlighting the students perspective. Schools are more likely to tap into students' needs and enhance their

self-esteem by respecting and responding to their recommendations. For schools to cavalierly act on behalf of students without having as a prerequisite to first truly listen to them does not lead to enhanced student esteem or need satisfaction (Glasser, 1986). It is also inconsistent with the movement in successful service-oriented organizations who are increasingly becoming "close to their customers" (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Albrecht and Zemke, 1985). Is it any wonder that our school dropout rates are so alarmingly high? Who is listening?

Proactive Data

As a consulting psychologist, I have been involved in designing drop-out prevention studies for school systems. When one reviews the drop-out prevention literature for student input, it is replete with narratives of what is wrong with the schools as seen through the eyes of disillusioned former students or returning older students. Drop-outs are typically asked for reasons why they dropped out (Hahn, Danzberger and Lefkowitz, 1987; OERI Urban Superintendents Network, 1987). Though an important source of drop-out prevention data that we should continue to collect, it is limited data. By itself, it is stilted reactive data - a one-sided coin of the most alienated and disillusioned. Voices clearly to be heard but not alone! We need to complement traditional reactive data sources by prioritizing the collection and utilization of "proactive

data".

To develop truly effective models and programs for drop-out prevention, one needs more "proactive data" as to what attracts and motivates at-risk students at earlier grade levels to want to stay in school and learn. Rather than focus reactively on what repels older students, the drop-out prevention research agenda needs to shift paradigms and focus positively on what holds and attracts younger at-risk students to their school system. To tap into their motivational structure while there is still openness and hope. Before they have made the mental decision to drop out.

Assessing the Holding Power and Attractiveness of a School System

Based on this rationale, I have pilot-tested the design and administration of developmentally appropriate student feedback and assessment mechanisms. (Pope, McHale and Craighead, 1988). My belief is that if school systems can collect and respond in a timely and appropriate fashion to proactive data, they are, in effect, creating a "social vaccine" that has holding power over drop-out risk factors. (California, 1990).

Focus Groups

One student feedback mechanism I have employed successfully with Urban 6th Grade students is to use "focus groups". This is a group interview technique borrowed from

successful business - marketing - practices where the intent is to understand the "consumer's" interests and preferences so that products and services can be successfully matched (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988).

This student feedback strategy is viewed as a logical extension of the School Development Program (SDP) of the Yale Child Study Center focus on student development and growth which takes into account the preparation and readiness of children for school (Comer, 1980). By periodically assessing the "goodness of fit" between students and their school experiences, teachers and administrators can gain valuable information to help them close the gap between the child's developmental status and the requirements of the school culture.

I designed, with school personnel, what we considered to be developmentally appropriate focus group questions based on sixth grade students ability to use their active imaginations.

Insert Chart I Here

What is revealing about these sixth grade students' comments to this researcher, is how similar in tone they were to interviews I have conducted with adult line workers in large organizations on the quality of their work life. These adults, like the students, wanted their jobs to engage

CHART I

ASSESSING THE HOLDING POWER and ATTRACTIVENESS OF A SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW RESULTS FOR URBAN SIXTH GRADE STUDENTS

Sample Questions	Sample Responses
1. Imagine you are magicians and have the power to make school such an exciting place for learning that you would always want to come. What would school be like?	1. Students responded in terms of "History through plays"; "Use of games such as spelling bee's, Jeopardy, Computer games and academic baseball"; "Science Outdoors studying plants and stars."
2. Describe the "perfect teacher".	2. Students responded in terms of "trying different ways to make it fun - not the same way all the time," "not yell a lot," "a sense of humor," "not reading from books all the time," "someone you can talk to," "gives you some choice.
3. Describe the "perfect school".	3. Students replied "bright colors and paintings," "sit in groups not rows," "comfortable chairs," "everyday isn't the same" - more variety from day to day so school isn't so boring."

them, to involve them actively, to employ all their abilities and talents. They, like the students, wanted supervisors who were sensitive and respectful and allowed them some discretion and choice in how best to perform the job. They, like the students, wanted a work setting that was physically attractive, comfortable, encourages teaming and allows for a variety of tasks and challenges. They, like the students, wanted to be treated as individuals and resisted standardization and regimentation.

Student Empowerment Report Card

Another student assessment feedback mechanism I have developed is called a Student Empowerment Report Card. It is based on what I call MCWA motivational climate indicators (Peters and Waterman, 1982, Glasser, 1986 and Kleiner, 1989). It is used with high school students and collaborating adults (i.e. parents and school personnel).

Insert Charts II and III Here

Individual students and adults through a structured format are interviewed. They are asked to confidentially grade their school on each indicator. After they assess a grade, I have asked for examples and comments that reflect the thinking behind their grading. I, then, immediately follow-up by asking for "simple next steps" or "practical recommendations" if implemented would improve their grading

M	C	W	A
MEANING	CONTROL	WINNING	ACTION

CHART III

SCHOOL SYSTEM
STUDENT EMPOWERMENT
REPORT CARD

A = Superior
B = Good
C = Fair
D = Poor
F = Failing

STUDENT ORIENTED MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE: MEANING - CONTROL - WINNING - ACTION	GRADE	COMMENTS	RECOMMENDATIONS
INDICATORS:			
I Students feel a sense of pride and belonging with their school.		I.	I.
II Students on a regular basis are given options & choices that encourage them to be active and responsible learners.		II	II
III Students are regularly recognized and given credit for effort and good work.		III	III
IV As school citizens, all students are encouraged to offer their point of view about the quality of their education which is then considered in making school improvements.		IV	IV

just one level. For example, from a "D to C" "C to B" or "B to A". I have them first try to identify positive things they want their school to begin or increase doing before identifying negative things to stop doing. When a school is given a grade of "A" on an initial indicator, I ask the interviewee to identify the specific positive things they want the school to continue to do to maintain their current strengths.

This report card format has proven itself useful as a "consumer sensitive" school planning tool. Rather than treat problem analysis data and action planning as separate distinct steps, the Student Empowerment Report Card holistically integrates and links specific needs assessment data with prescriptive action plans.

Summary

In conclusion, I have tried to demonstrate the value and practical application of nurturing and responding to students as legitimate stakeholders in the educational process.

I would like to close with the following quotation which I believe serves as a fitting tribute to the developmental orientation and accomplishments of my colleagues on the School Development Program of the Yale Child Study Center.

We sow a thought and reap an act;
We sow an act and reap a habit;
We sow a habit and reap a character;
We sow a character and reap a destiny.

William Makepeace Thackeray, English Novelist

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